

The North Carolina of the past was an economy built on agriculture, textiles and furniture manufacturing. There was little need for a wealth of education when the whole family worked in the mill or on the farm.

But time has changed and changed at warp speed.

People and government must understand that low skill and little knowledge is a weakness. Attitudes must transition as the economy does.

I learned this lesson early. I was raised on a tobacco farm in eastern North Carolina and my father and grandfather ran a tobacco warehouse where the “golden leaf” was sold at auction. I also worked for the tobacco companies in the summer during college.

Yet in '98 while serving as Attorney General, I sued the tobacco industry over public health issues.

That marked the first time I had ever seen a tractorcade. There were more farmers circling my office than at the State Fair on Farm Bureau Day.

And as Governor, I have significantly raised the tobacco tax. I approached this issue by focusing on health and youth access to tobacco. Nobody could argue that “children should smoke;” it conflicted with common sense and common values. And this provided a common foundation to build a change in attitudes.

At the same time, I saw the Pillowtex company close and in a single day take jobs away from 4,000 textile workers in Kannapolis. Textiles were so deeply embedded in the economic and social structure that the name of the town, Kannapolis is Greek for “city of looms.”

At that mill, fewer than half the workers had a high school education. Most were in their 40s. And the same thing happened to more than 80,000 textile workers across North Carolina.

Given this long history of low educational expectations, just imagine the challenges in confronting such a deep-seated mindset.

But, it was also clear that so many otherwise good and strong people had been made weak and vulnerable by lack of education. North Carolina was not going to set them adrift. The policy decision was to value their dignity and help them retrain and be productive again.

Many workers have now returned to their community college for additional training. Though expensive for the state, they are transitioning to new and better jobs. And we are changing high school to meet the demands of the 21st Century and the needs of the children of these workers.

These reforms are working and the economy is transitioning to one based on knowledge, talent and skill; another small step to help the weak grow strong.

North Carolina has a great reputation for our universities, but not everyone had access to them. Less than ten years ago, our college going rate was below the national average. Today it is fifth highest in the country. And we are creating more access through scholarships. This too is value-based policy.

The best way to help the weak is to make them strong to begin with. Education is a key to that strength.